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THE NON-STANDARD VERNACULAR OF THE NEGRO COMMUNITY--SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS.

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IN CONNECTION WITH RESEARCH INTO THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STANDARD ENGLISH AND THE NONSTANDARD DIALECTS OF THE URBAN GHETTOS, IT WAS FOUND THAT THERE IS A DIFFERENCE IN THE RELATIVE DEPTH OR ABSTRACTNESS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS GRAMMATICAL RULES. IN MEMORY OR "SHADOW" TESTS, GROUPS OF NEGRO BOYS FROM 10 TO 14 YEARS OLD WERE HIGHLY MOTIVATED TO REPEAT EXACTLY SENTENCES GIVEN IN STANDARD AND NONSTANDARD ENGLISH. RESULTS INDICATE THAT SOME STANDARD FORMS, SUCH AS USE OF "IS", WERE EASILY REMEMBERED AND REPEATED. SENTENCES WITH STANDARD ENGLISH NEGATION FORMS OR "IF" CLAUSES, HOWEVER, WERE UNDERSTOOD BUT WERE REPEATED IN NONSTANDARD DIALECT. REGARDING THE COMPLEX QUESTION OF THE RELATIVE SOCIAL VALUE OF THE TWO FORMS OF ENGLISH, THE AUTHOR FEELS THAT THE ADULT NEGRO COMMUNITY SHARES THE NORMATIVE SOCIAL VALUES OF THE LARGER WHITE COMMUNITY. NEGRO TEENAGERS, HOWEVER, ASSOCIATE STANDARD ENGLISH WITH "EFFEMINACY, GENTILITY, AND OVERCULTIVATION," AND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS SHOULD TAKE THIS INTO ACCOUNT. RESEARCH ALSO SHOWS THAT CHILDREN JUDGED "NONVERBAL" IN SCHOOL LANGUAGE TESTS ACTUALLY HAD RICH VERBAL RESOURCES WHEN STIMULATED BY SOPHISTICATED TECHNIQUES. THE AUTHOR FEELS THAT CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS CAN BE MOTIVATED TO LEARN STANDARD ENGLISH BY EMPHASIZING ITS VALUE FOR INFLUENCING AND CONTROLLING OTHER PEOPLE, SINCE THIS IS THE USE FOR WHICH VERBAL SKILLS ARE ALREADY PRIZED IN THE VERNACULAR CULTURE. (JD)

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THE NON-STANDARD VERNACULAR OF THE NEGRO COMMUNITY: SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Before we approach any of the theoretical or practical problems connected with the language of the urban ghettos, it is necessary to arrive at some kind of modus vivendi with the term "Negro dialect". A great many people, including educators, speak of "Negro dialect", and a great many others object and even deny the existence of such a form. Furthermore, there is considerable resistance within the school systems to any mention of the particular characteristics of Negro students or Negro speech.

First, it is obvious to anyone that there is no one speech form, and no linguistic markers, that are common to all Negro people. There is no racial, genetic or physiological feature involved here. There is a culturally inherited pattern which has been transmitted to the centers of most northern cities by migrants from the South, the great majority of whom happen to be Negroes. Most of the forms heard in the Northern ghettoes are also used by some white Southerners. However, it is also a fact that the Negro **residents** of Northern cities are the chief representatives of these Southern regional traits for white Northerners. These traits have lost their geographical significance for most Northerners, and taken on the social significance of identification with the Negro ethnic group.

Not all Southern features survive in the Northern ghettos. A selected set of them are common, while others tend to disappear; the most extraordinary fact is that in city after city the end result is quite similar. The speech of Negro children in Philadelphia, New York,

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Chicago, or Los Angeles is cast in much the same mold: the differences that do appear can be traced to differences in the surrounding dialect of the white community.

We are currently engaged in a study of the structural and functional differences between the non-standard English of the urban vernacular and the standard English of the schoolroom.[1] In several publications, we have provided some preliminary information on the principle structural conflicts involved here, and some of the immediate consequences for the teaching of reading.[2] Though I will not attempt to summarize this data here, it will be useful to think of these alternations under four general headings:

[1] There are a number of systematic differences in the sound pattern which have little grammatical significance. There is an asymmetrical neutralization of /θ/ and /f/ in final position, for example,[3] so that Ruth is merged with roof.

[2] A much more important set of phonological differences intersect grammatical features: along this phonological-grammatical intersection lie the most important problems for teachers of speech and reading. The simplification of consonant clusters operates so that muss and must are homonyms, but also miss and missed. The phonological process which eliminates final and preconsonantal r and l is deeply involved with the grammatical problems of the copula and the future respectively. We have dealt with this topic more than any other in our previous publications.

[3] A fairly obvious set of morphological differences might be singled out: plurals such as mens, teeths or metathesized forms such as aks for 'ask'. Although these forms are quite resistant to alternation

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with the standard forms, they do not belong to a highly organized system in equilibrium which challenges linguistic analysis.

[4] There are many syntactic rules by which non-standard Negro English differs from standard English. Some, like the optional deletion of the copula in He with us, are commonplace and are easily converted to the standard form by speakers. But many other syntactic differences are governed by deep-seated and abstract rules. Embedded yes-no questions such as I asked Alvin if he knew appear as I asked Alvin did he know. In this case we are dealing with two alternate realizations of an underlying "Question" element: the use of if with declarative order, as opposed to no if with the inverted order of auxiliary and subject. This non-standard form is surprisingly regular and resistant to conversion to the standard form. The comparative produces a wealth of complex forms very different from standard English: He runs the same fast as Jim can run. But, as interesting and complex as such syntactic rules may be, they cannot be considered as important as the items described under [2], which will undoubtedly draw the major share of pedagogical attention for some time to come.

At this point it may be proper to ask just how deep-seated and extensive are the differences between the non-standard and standard forms we are considering. There are various view-points on this subject: some scholars believe that the underlying phrase structures and semantics of non-standard Negro English are quite different, and reflect the influence of an hypothesized earlier Creole grammar. Others believe that this English dialect, like all other dialects of English, is fundamentally identical with standard English, and differs only in relatively superficial respects. One way to look at this argument is

to ask whether differences in surface structure (the order of words and the forms they assume) are greater or less that the differences in the most abstract generative rules.

It is not important that we attempt to resolve this issue here. Our own research is concerned more with discriminating the relative depth or abstractness of the rules which govern various forms, and it may be useful to indicate the results of one investigation we have recently conducted into the ability of Negro boys, 10 to 14 years old, to imitate sentences. These trials are conducted as "memory tests", in which groups of Negro boys that we know well are given very strong motivation to try to repeat back sentences exactly. Such tests have been carried out before with young children 3 to 6 years old, but no one has studied imitation or "shadowing" of older children across a dialect boundary. We find that some boys are relatively good at repeating standard sentences, even very long ones, while a good many others find great difficulty with standard sentences and do better in reproducing the non-standard sentences. The greatest interest for us lies in the differential ability of children with different rules. If we consider the copula, for example, in sentences like Larry is older than George and George is a friend of mine, we observe very little difficulty in the preservation of the is. In our first trials, 21 out of 22 such copulas were given back to us in the standard form. But if we consider the problem of negative concord, which produces such sentences as Nobody never know nothing about no game today, we find a different situation. In about half of the cases, the sentences were repeated back with non-standard negative concord. Nobody ever said that becomes Nobody never said that; and one can re-emphasize the standard form insistently with little change in the repetitions produced by the boys. Similarly, sentences

such as He asked if I could go to the game today are repeated instantly without hesitation as He asked could I go to the game today. Such results indicate that the deletion of the copula is a relatively superficial rule which occurs relatively late in the grammar and alternates easily with the undeleted form, while the other cases are more fundamental differences in the compulsory rules of the transformational component of the grammar.

We can draw a further set of conclusions from the results of this work. Consider for a moment what is implied about the competence of the speaker who repeats instantly He asked could I go... when we say He asked if I could go... .His sentence may be considered a mistake, for which he is penalized in the testing procedure. But what kind of a mistake? It is the correct vernacular form corresponding to the standard form: it means the same thing as the standard form. To produce this non-standard sentence the listener must first understand the standard form, automatically convert this into an abstract representation, then produce his own form by a complex series of rules ultimately appearing as He asked could I go... . We cannot explain this response by imagining that the listener is trying to remember individual words, or failing to match one word to another in the right sequence. This phenomenon is a convincing demonstration of the abstract character of the language mechanism involved, and it also indicates that the structure of Negro non-standard English is quite complex. For many rules, there are two perceptual routes but only one production route. The teacher's task here will be to supply the practice in producing sentences by rules which are already well established in the perceptive apparatus.

We may wish to turn our attention now to the important

and complex question of the relative evaluation of the two forms of English being considered here. Our studies of language within the speech community indicate that the evolution of language is strongly influenced by sets of social values consciously or unconsciously attributed to linguistic forms by the adult members of the community. So far, each of the studies that we have carried out indicate that there is greater agreement on the normative side than in speech performance, and the Negro community is no exception. Our subjective reaction tests show extraordinary uniformity in the unconscious evaluation of the non-standard forms by all sections of the Negro community, middle class and working class, of Northern or Southern origin.

With the rise of strong nationalist feelings in the Negro community,, some observers have thought that separate linguistic norms would appear, and that the non-standard vernacular of the urban ghettos would be treated more positively by the leaders of the Negro community. In actual fact, this has not been so, and there is little reason to think that it will be the case in the future. The norms of correct speech are the same for the Negro community as for the white community; although various groups may move in different directions in their informal, spontaneous and intimate styles, they converge in their attitude on the appropriate forms for school, and public language. Suggestions have been received that reading primers be prepared in the vernacular, to accelerate the process of learning to read in the early grades. The results of our investigations throw considerable doubt on the acceptability of such a program. The Negro adults we have interviewed would agree almost unanimously that their children should be taught standard English in school,

and any other policy would probably meet with strong opposition.

This unanimity is a characteristic of the adult community; we obtain no such uniform pattern from teen-agers. When we consider that a child learns his basic syntax from 18 to 36 months, and by eight years old has settled most of the fine points of phonology and morphology, it is surprising to discover how late in life he acquires the adult pattern in the evaluation of language. Children learn early, of course, that there is careful and casual style, and they are perfectly able to recognize the teacher's special style - but the wider social significance of dialect differences seems to be hidden from them to a surprising extent. Clearly one approach to facilitating the learning of standard English is to accelerate the acquisiton of evaluative norms. At the age of 25, almost everyone comes to realize the import of language stratification, but by then, of course, it is difficult to change patterns of language production.

Our subjective reaction tests determine the unconscious evaluation of individual variables within the dialect pattern. The first evaluation scales that were devised allowed the listener to place the speaker along a scale of job suitability: what was the highest job that a person could hold speaking as he did? In our work in Harlem, we have added to this scale others which register converse attitudes: If the speaker was in a street fight, how likely would he be to win? or How likely is it that the speaker become a friend of yours? As we expected, complementary sets of values are attributed to most non-standard forms. To the extent that the use of a certain form, such as fricative th in this thing, raises a speaker on the job scale, it lowers him on the

scale of toughness or masculinity. These opposing values are equally strong in all social groups: we find that the middle-class adults are most consistent in attributing both sets to a given group of speakers.

We have long been aware of the fact that the non-standard forms are supported by the values of group identity and opposition to middle class norms which are strong among working class people. The recent results of our subjective reaction tests suggest that the school system may actually be supporting this opposition or even inculcating it. The adolescent boy knows that there is no correlation in fact between toughness and the use of non-standard English: he knows a great many bad fighters who have perfect command of the vernacular, and many good fighters who do fairly well with school language. But the teacher is not as keenly aware of the limitations of her stereotypes; I think it quite possible that while she attempts to teach the middle-class values of good English, she is simultaneously conveying the notion that good English is inconsistent with toughness and masculinity which is highly valued by adolescent boys. Teaching programs should be carefully examined by men raised in the community who can help detect and eliminate the association of standard English with effeminacy, gentility, and over-cultivation. It seems to be true that a perfect command of standard English weakens one's grasp of the vernacular: I have met no one who excelled in both forms. But I think it is important to minimize the loss, and particularly to minimize the opposition of middle-class and working-class values which has come to cluster about the language issue in such a stereotyped manner.

A great deal of our current research is concentrated upon the <u>functional</u> conflict between standard and non-standard

English. It is too early to make any strong statements in this direction, although we believe that the most important educational applications will stem from an understanding of differences in the use of language. It is worth pointing out that most language testing which takes place within the schools gives a very poor indication of the over-all verbal skills of the children being tested. In an adult-dominated environment--the school, the home, or the recreation center--many children have learned elaborate defensive techniques which involve a minimum of verbal response. Monosyllabic answers, repressed speech, special intonation contours are all characteristic of such face-to-face testing situations. As a result, a great deal of public funds are being spent on programs designed tc supply verbal stimulus to "non-verbal" children. The notion of cultural deprivation here is surely faulty: it is based on a mythology that has arisen about children who receive very little verbal stimulus, seldom hear complete sentences--children who are in fact supposed to be culturally empty vehicles.

In our research, we frequently encounter children who behave in a face-to-face encounter with adults as if they were "non-verbal". But when we utilize our knowledge of the social forces which control language behavior, and stimulate speech with more shphisticated techniques, the non-verbal child disappears.

These children have an extremely rich verbal culture; they are proficient at a wide range of verbal skills, even though many of these skills are unacceptable within the school program. The problem, of course, is to teach a different set of verbal skills, used for different purposes; but the teacher should be absolutely clear on the fact that she is opposing one verbal culture with another.

If the task were only to fill a cultural vacuum, it would be much easier than it actually turns out to be.

In conclusion, I might suggest one implication of our studies of language use which might have value within the school system. Intelligence and verbal skill within the culture of the street is prized just as highly as it is within the school:- but the use of such skills is more often to manipulate and control other people than to convey information to them. Of course it is the school's task to emphasize the value of language in cognitive purposes. But in order to motivate adolescent and pre-adolescent children to learn standard English, it would be wise to emphasize its value for handling social situations, avoiding conflict (or provoking conflict when desired), for influencing and controlling other people. This is the use for which verbal skills are already prized in the vernacular culture, and it seems to be good strategy to take advantage of the values that are already present, even while one is modifying them and teaching new ones. Long before the child has learned the full range of middle-class educational values, he must make a good start in mastering the fundamental rules of standard English. Any strategy which gives him strong motivation for reading and writing in standard English should be followed; we are all familiar with the fact that success or failure in these fundamental skills is an important determinant of success or failure in the school program as a whole.

Footnotes

[1]This research is supported by the U.S. Office of Education as Cooperative Research Project 3288.

[2]Labov, William, Paul Cohen and Clarence Robins. A Preliminary Study of the Structure of English Used by Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City. Final Report - Cooperative Research Project nNo. 3091, Office of Education, 1965.

Labov, William. "Some Sources of Reading Problems for Negro Speakers of Non-Standard English." In Frazier, Alexander (ed.) New Directions in Elementary English. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967.

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[3]This feature, like many such purely phonological differences, is of little pedagogical significance. By "asymmetrical" I mean that Ruth is heard as roof, but not vice-versa. Negro speakers seldom confuse the two classes of words, since they do not give hypercorrect roof as rooth. The distinction is quite hard to hear consistently, even for white speakers.